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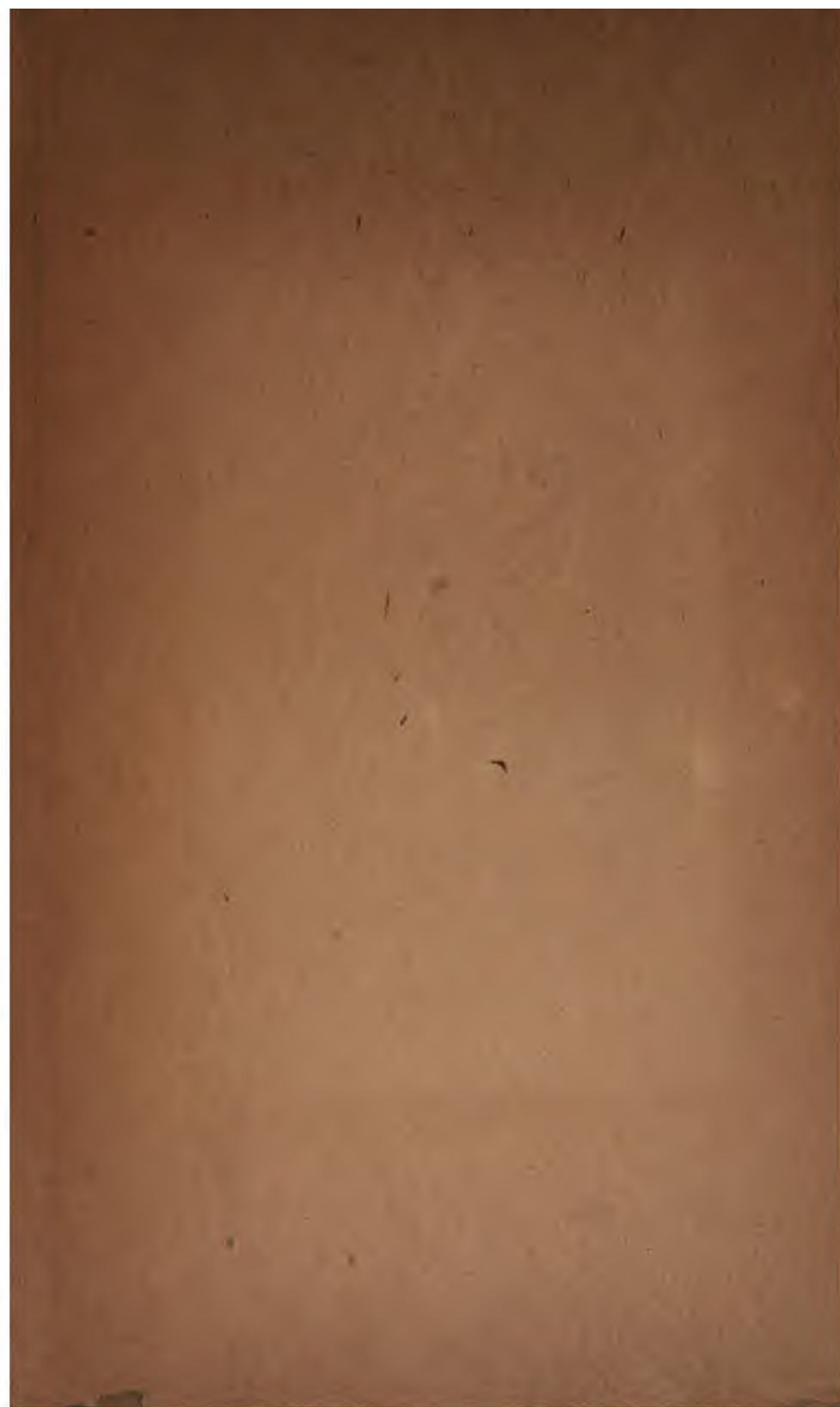
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FROM

R. R. Adams





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Bookbindings  
of  
Ralph Randolph Adams  
by  
Arnold Lethwidge

New York  
Privately Printed  
1904









RALPH RANDOLPH ADAMS  
From a pencil sketch by Mrs. Adams

THE  
BOOKBINDINGS  
OF  
RALPH RANDOLPH ADAMS

*AN APPRECIATION*

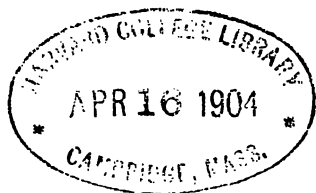
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R. R. Adams,  
N. Y. City.

THE LITERARY COLLECTOR PRESS  
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# BOOKBINDINGS

## OF

### RALPH RANDOLPH ADAMS

SOME YEARS AGO Mr. Ralph Randolph Adams, whose bookbindings form the subject of this brief appreciation, bound some books for himself, just for the pleasure he found in the occupation. Soon he found that he could bind a book as well as any professional; so to the enjoyment of making beautiful bindings he presently added the satisfaction of making a living by it. He established himself in the profession of binding books, and has made his way straight to the top.

He was never content to keep to the paths of the average binder. He could produce as substantial and artistic a tooled binding as the next man, and he took much pride in the quality of his work. His inlaid bindings were carefully done, after the methods of his predecessors and contemporaries. But his energy could not stop at that. He continued to experiment and study, with leathers

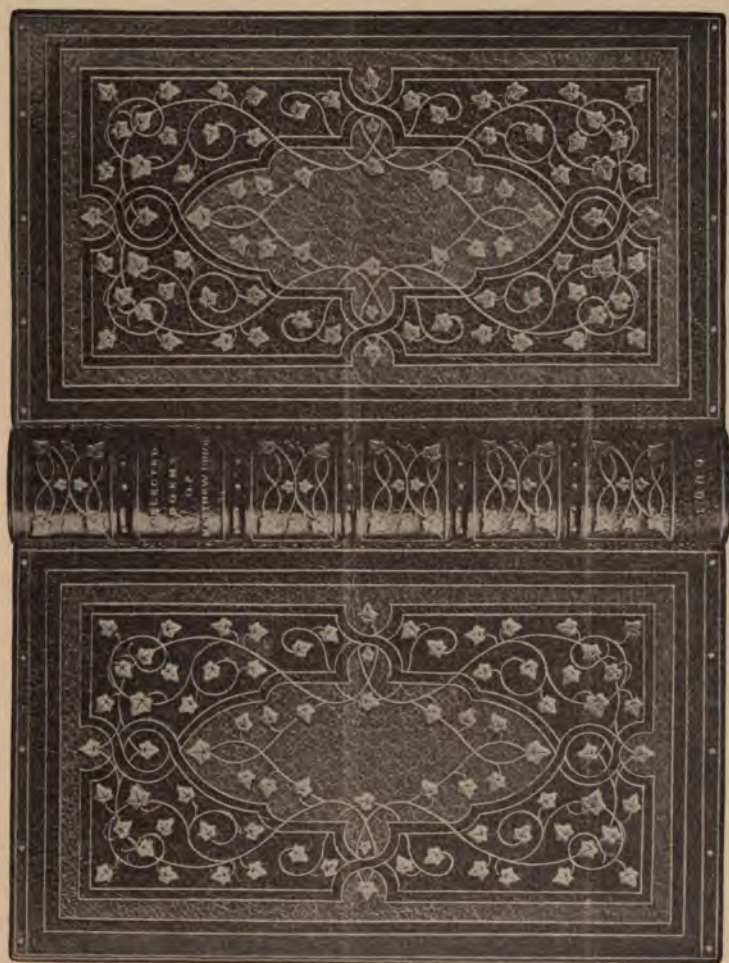
### BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS

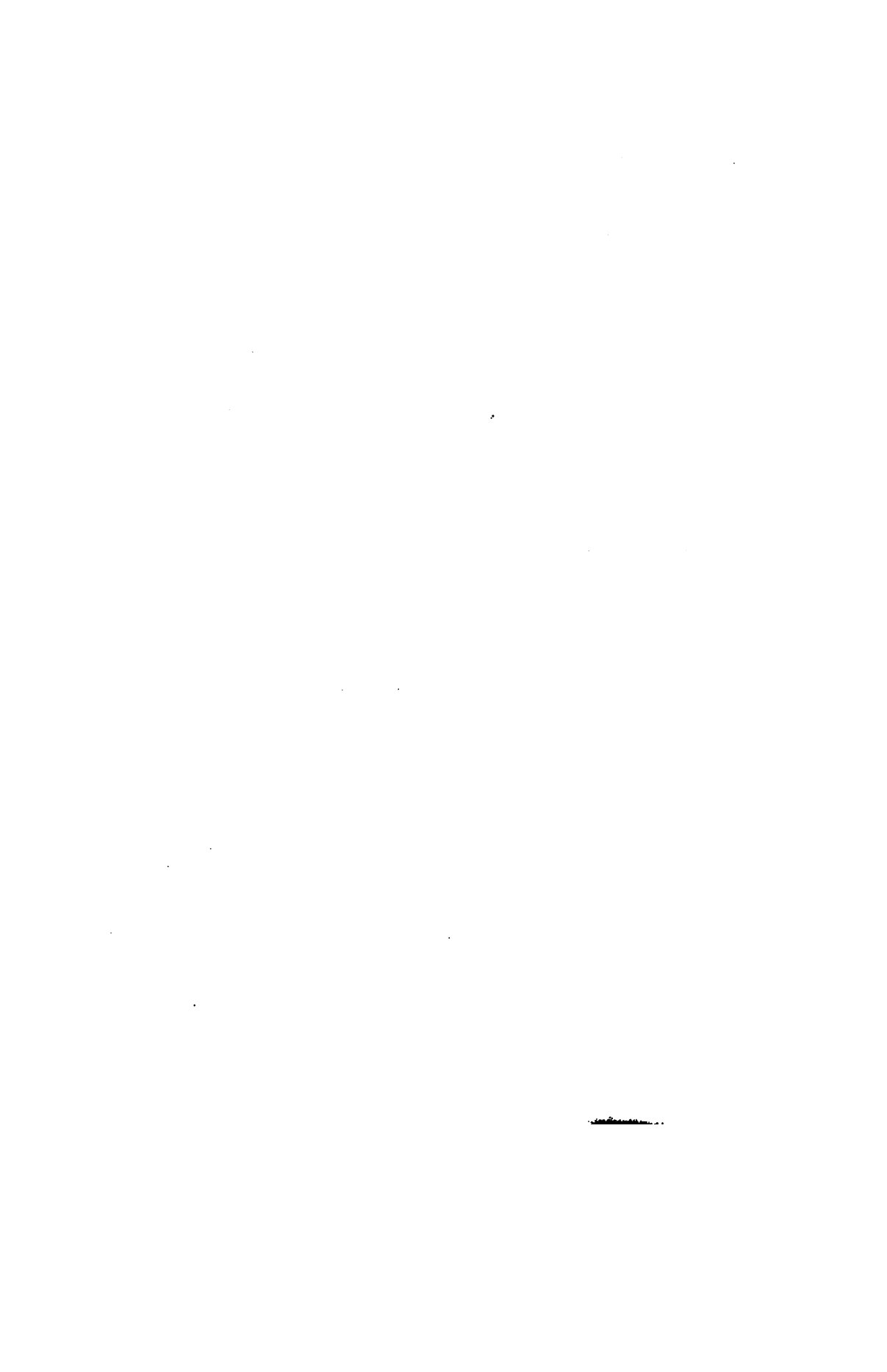
and cements and ideas, getting results that were better or worse, learning from successes and failures. He contemplated the experiences of the early binders, in the use of mosaic. In the old cities of Europe—Venice, Vienna, Florence, Paris—in the youthful days of the binder's art, men had attempted in leathers the mosaic that was so universally used in tiles, precious metals and other decorative materials.

They fitted together their pieces of leather and so formed designs of much beauty; but soon the paste that joined the pieces would lose its adhesive properties. Then the leather, no longer held in place, would shrink. The joints opened, the edges curled, and the book became as sorry a sight as the hypocritical dame who encountered the magic Mantle of Virtue in the old ballad—

When she had taken the mantle  
With purpose for to wear,  
It shrunk up to her shoulder  
And left her back all bare.

In fact, no one, in those days, seems to have hit upon any process for the preservation of leather mosaic work. So the binders got around that difficulty by putting the book into a full leather binding, then paring other leathers thin, cutting them out with scissors, and veneering the design onto the binding. This "onlaid" process has been used from that day to this, by the best binders and





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the worst, and is so universally known as "inlay" that one involuntarily connects that term with veneering, rather than with the unused mosaic process.

The onlaid binding has been developed to its highest possibilities, and the master craftsmen, Trautz-Bauzonnet supreme among them, have made of it a thing of rare beauty and considerable durability.

Mr. Adams has done, and is doing, some very handsome bindings with onlaid designs. But he has always recognized the shortcomings of the process,—the loss of the grain and rich color in the pared leather, the tendency to curl at the edges, the lack of sincerity in the imitation mosaic,—and he has for years experimented to overcome the difficulties which have hitherto prevented the perfection of the process of inlaying.

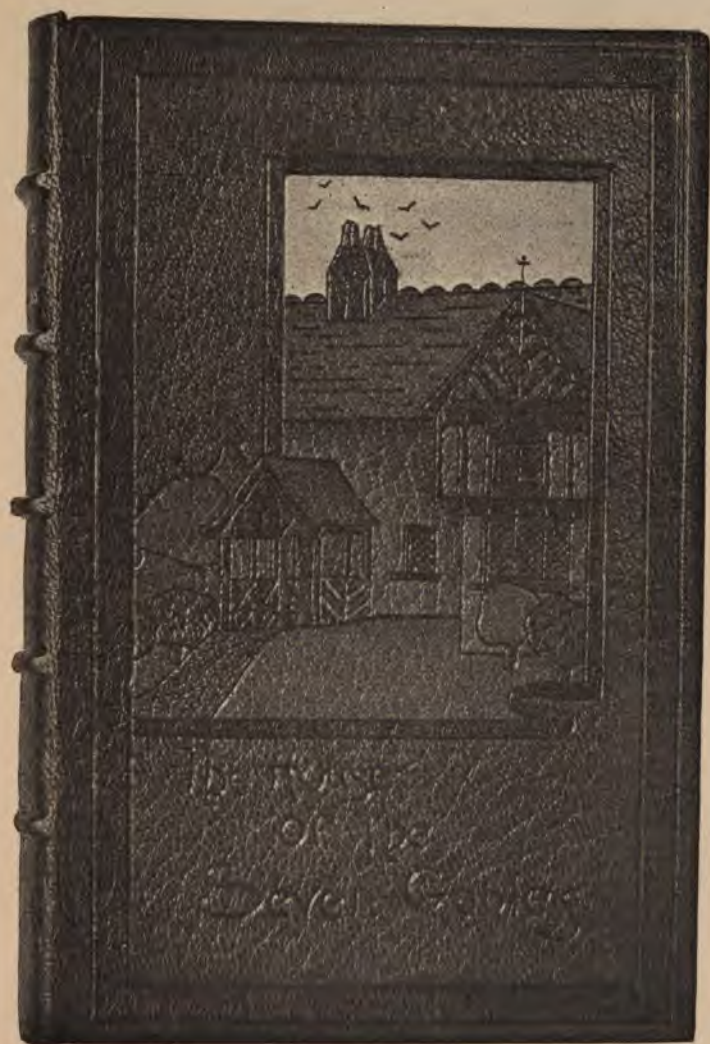
After many experiments, trials and failures, he evolved a method by which the most perfect bindings are turned out. These bindings are built up in true mosaic fashion, of bits of leather accurately fitted together; or the leather that covers the book is carved out in patterns with a knife, clean to the board, the cut-out pieces being then replaced by other pieces of the desired color and texture, which exactly fill the vacant spaces. So perfectly do the

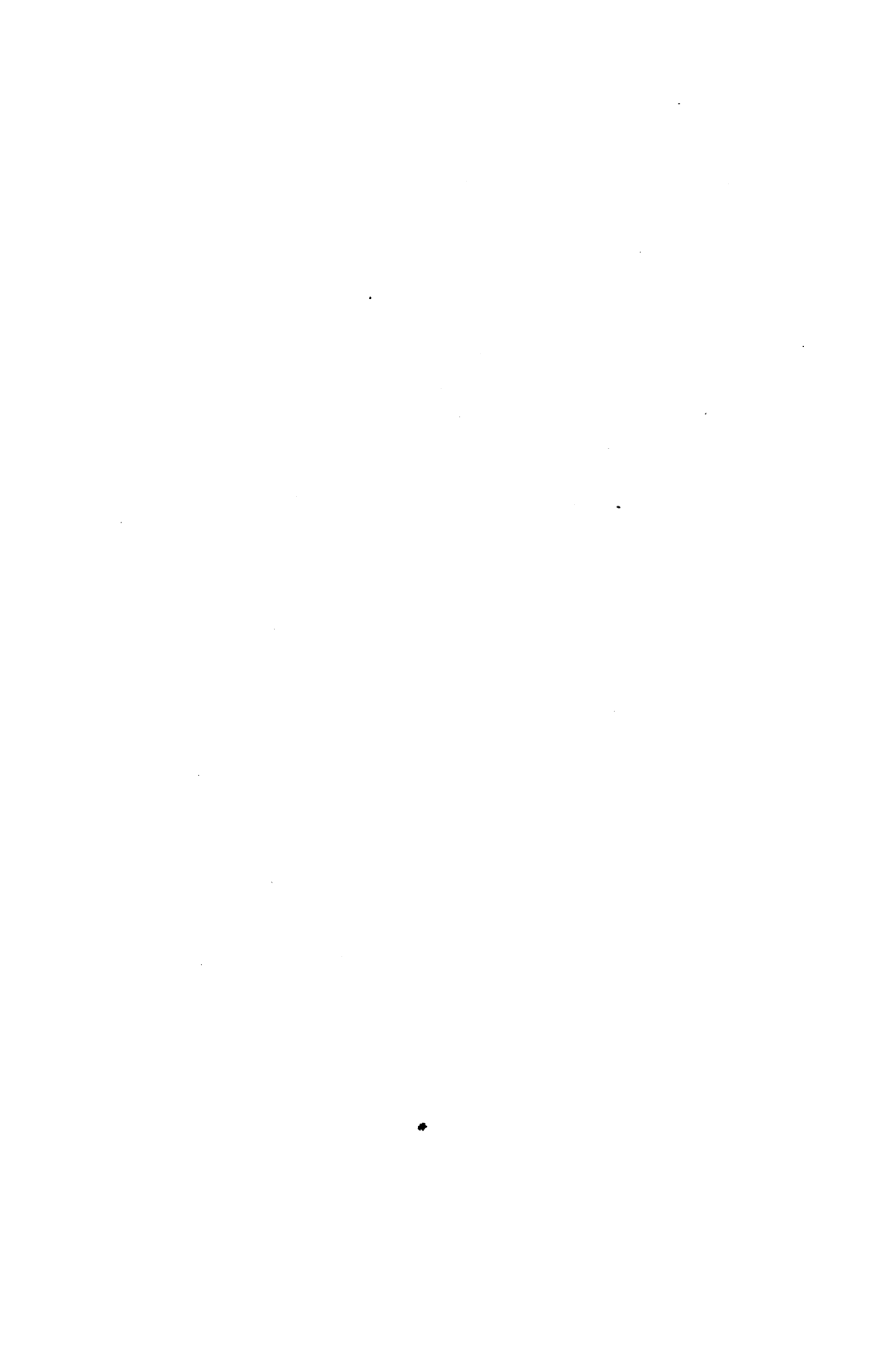


### BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS

leathers fit into each other and so firmly are they united that the hot tooling iron can follow the seams, leaving its line of gold but never making a break in the smooth surface. The effect is of an unbroken leather side, till one looks closely and sees that the grain changes as well as the color. The binding on a copy of Swinburne's *A Midsummer Holiday* is a Moresque mosaic in three shades of blue. A publisher who wished to reproduce this binding in colors, as a magazine illustration, took the book to a veteran ink-maker. While searching for the proper inks, the expert explained that it would be impossible to reproduce the colors exactly, as the inks would not give the same effect on paper that they had produced on the leather. It was hard to persuade the old ink-maker that the binding was made up of over fifty pieces of leather. A solid leather side printed in three colors was his only idea of the process that produced such an effect.

The skeptic may infer that this coherence is a fleeting excellence; that a few years, existence in a steam-heated, gas-lighted library will serve this binding as it did those of the mosaic binders of old. But the wear and tear of many years may be concentrated into systematic ill-treatment for as many days. When a book has been scrubbed with a stiff brush, soaked in a pail of water, and baked





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for hours in an oven, it may be presumed to have passed through Book Purgatory. If there is any thing left of the book, it is certainly on the way to immortality. As a matter of fact, this treatment means ruin and death to the best levant morocco,—such morocco as has survived the hard usage of centuries, on old volumes bound before the discovery of the art of printing, and still preserves its strength and good looks.

After the drastic treatment described, there is not much left of even such time-ignoring levant as Mr. Adams uses in his bindings and in his tests. But the pattern of the mosaic is still preserved, and the leather has crumbled least at the joints, where by ordinary rules it should first show weakness. From the warped and worthless boards, little walls of cement, holding together some fragments of the leather, still arise, forming a network whereby the bibliopegic archæologist may reconstruct the original binding.

The durability of the genuine mosaic binding having been established, the skeptic is still unconvinced. "What's the use? The onlaid method is easier, cheaper, and plenty good enough. Why a new method?"

The conservative is usually inclined to let well enough alone; and when he has found a "well

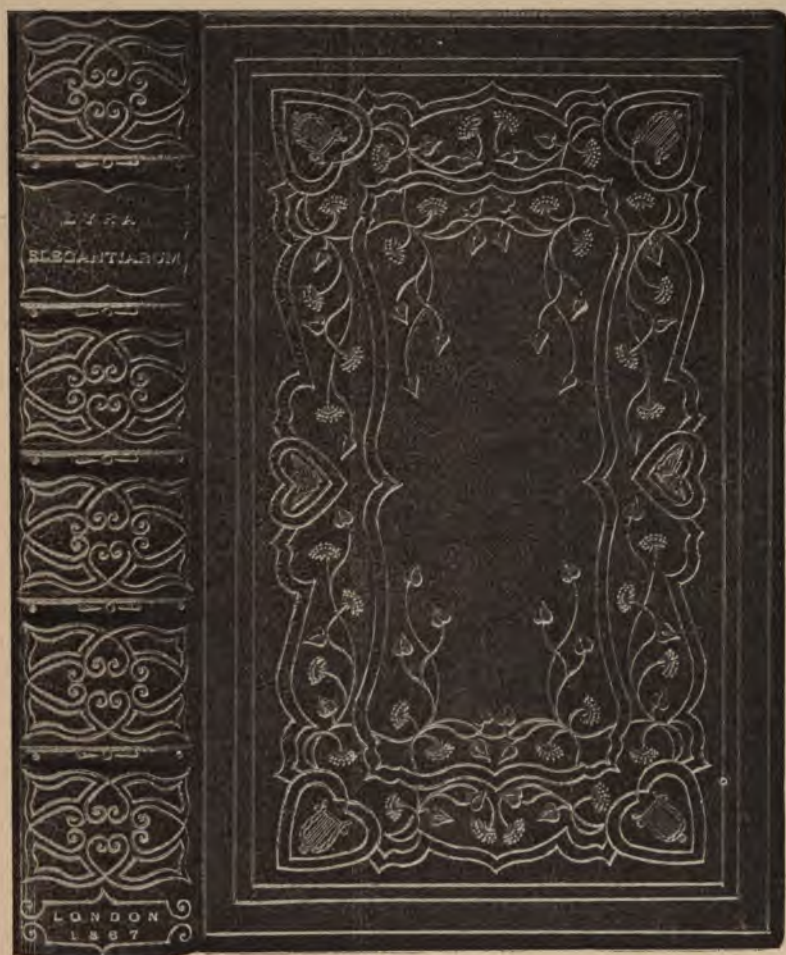
### *BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS*

enough," it seems the safest thing to do—at least till the new has proved its right to supercede or to live by the side of the old. Between these two methods there is no question of a choice of one that will mean a refusal of the other. Onlaying is as good as it ever was, and in the hands of an artist it is a beautiful and satisfactory method of producing some results. Inlaying by the new method is merely a more beautiful and more satisfactory way of producing, not only the same results, but many others which it has always been conceded were not to be produced by the old method.

The question of price is one that will usually decide the question of choice of method. Mr. Adams uses every method in which he has found worth—tooling, onlay, inlay, painting, whatever has been proved a substantial and artistic means of beautifying the binding of a book. The foundation work is the same. When the leather covers the book, its purpose of utility is served. The Jansenist binding is the book's Quaker garb, sufficient for all purposes except the satisfaction of the soul's love of beauty.

In accordance with one's taste in ornament, with the love he has for the book within the binding, and with the length of his purse, will be the style and method of the finishing of the binding. A little







### *BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS*

tooling, tastefully designed and well done, is all that the ordinarily good book needs. The rank and file, the standard editions, the books for constant reading or reference, are best put into a tailor-made sort of binding, ready for travel or work, but neat and smart in appearance as they stand in rows on the shelves.

Next in order come the books of one's special collection, the prides of his heart—his large paper, limited editions, handsomely illustrated, aristocrats among books. For these let him select unusual colors and leathers, and add a symbolic design in contrasting colors and elaborate tooling. Here let the old and well-liked onlay serve to make fine these choice volumes which he delights to honor. They may be quiet and elegant, or gayly resplendent, and if his purse fail not too soon he will be able to do the same justice to enough of them to make his special cases a gorgeous show indeed.

But above all these, every collector possesses at least one "pearl of great price," the book on which he focusses all his love of books. He loves not the others less, but this one more. He thinks of it more than he reads it, doubtless. Perhaps it is not in the least readable, even. But for some good and sufficient reason, it outranks all the rest. He handles it reverently and displays it only to the



### *BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS*

true and tried. It is of the blood royal, and royal raiment must it wear. Then let him brush aside all the styles and methods of which it can be said, without disparagement either to books or bindings, that they were good enough for the rest, but not for this. For this one book, or for this royal family of books if he is fortunate enough to acquire others that are its peers, only the best will do; and the best, in substantiality and in effectiveness, is a genuine mosaic binding of well-dyed, handsomely-grained leathers of equal thickness, inlaid to the boards and enriched with gold. Here shall no paring knife destroy the grain of the leather. No paste shall show through thin surfaces, dulling the colors. No possibility of curling edges shall be tolerated. All shall be as perfect as the hand of the craftsman can make it, and as the purse of the collector can buy.

Genuine mosaic will never be as simple a process as that other method so long known as inlay that it is hard to change its name. It will never be as moderate in price, probably never become cheap enough for the collector of limited means to own more than a few examples. That is one of the necessary concomitants of its excellence. The best things are never a free gift, unless of Nature's bestowing, and Nature has bestowed morocco bindings on goats, not on books.





### BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS

A few of the bindings which Mr. Adams has produced in mosaic may well be pictured and described here, as it has not been the fortune of many outside the great art centres to see them. Most of his work has been done to order for private collectors, as Henry W. Poor, J. Pierpont Morgan, Junius S. Morgan, and Gen. Rush C. Hawkins. In the binding exhibitions at Ponaventure's and Scribners', fine specimens have been seen, and some at the Arts and Crafts exhibitions of the smaller cities.

The binding of the *Lyra Elegantiarum*, in the library of Mr. Henry W. Poor, is a green levant morocco. A narrow band of blue, inlaid between parallel lines of tooling, forms a frame for an arabesque design of red ribbons connecting six hearts in blue. Golden lyres and butterflies are tooled on the hearts, and there is enough tooling in a delicate flower and leaf design to blend the colors and brighten the whole symbolic design.

In the design of Grolier lines and ivy leaves and branches, on Matthew Prior's *Selected Poems*, tooling and mosaic are mutually essential to the carrying out of the design.

*Ballads and Lyrics of Old France* displays three purple fleur-de-lis, with the lance-like leaves in green, supporting a white shield bearing the title, laid into a field of turquoise morocco. The tooling is



### BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS

subordinated to the delicate inlay, and the coloring is very effective. On the doublure, passion flowers and leaves are inlaid in an original design.

In pictorial bindings the mosaic method shows its superiority in the fine effects to be gained by using leathers of different textures. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is bound in a levant of finest grain, effacing itself in the background. The Tree of Knowledge shows its gnarled and ancient trunk in a heavy, irregular grain, against which the skin of the serpent is clearly defined in a grain of another quality. In the apples and leaves, too, the grain as well as the color characterizes the objects depicted.

The binding of *At the Sign of the Lyre* is a pastoral, in all the variegated hues of Nature on a shining summer day. Here Mr. Adams has called in the aid of stains, which color the sky and the flowers, while brown, white, red, and green leathers bear the brunt of the color-scheme.

One of the finest tooled bindings which the Adams Bindery has turned out is that on Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan's copy of Boccaccio's *Life of Dante*, which is bound in brown levant with a wide Grolier border, and a central shield, the field being well filled with bands and azured ornaments, all in gold tooling. For elaborate richness the design is unsurpassable.





## *BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS*

It is surprising how utterly the book-lover is at the mercy of his binder, how dependent upon his honesty and sincerity. It is easy, certainly, to know the work of the unskilled artizan, the apprentice. But if a binder's wit has outgrown his conscience and his industry, how he can shirk the endless inside work that is invisible to the buyer! How he can leave to careless helpers the sewing, the trimming, the handling of rare plates and autographs! How he can manipulate the flimsiest, cheapest leather to make it pose as French levant! How he can juggle with paste and the paring knife and turn out a binding that will look to the amateur, for a time, like the full-levant, inlaid work of art that it is not!

It is a delight to turn from some binding such as I have described, to any of Mr. Adams's work, and examine it in detail. These are no weaklings, these handsome volumes. They are made to open and shut, to handle and to read. The same high quality of workmanship and material has been put into every book that leaves the Adams Bindery. The steps of the inside work are carefully watched by Mr. Adams. The best materials are supplied to his assistants and nothing but the best workmanship is tolerated. The binding leathers are specially selected and imported, only the strongest and finest qualities being used. The inlaying is done by Mr.



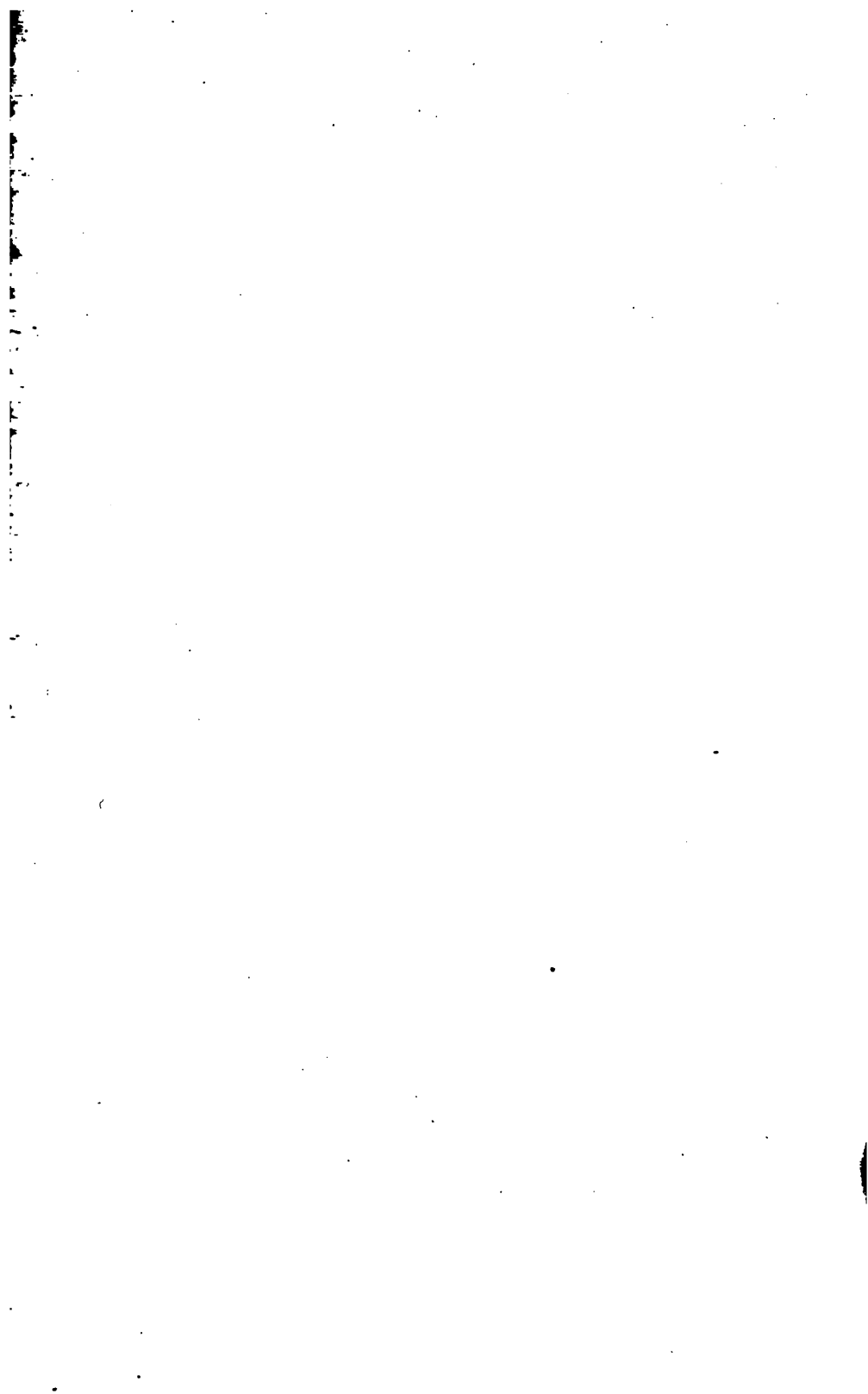
### *BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS*

Adams himself, the assistant finishers, have his immediate supervision.

The cost of the leather—calf, pig-skin, Turkey morocco or French levant—forms one factor in determining the cost of the binding. The elaborateness of the finishing—the tooling, onlay, or mosaic—is another. The foundation work is unvarying in price and quality, always of the same substantial, skilful craftsmanship.

The designing of book bindings is in itself an art, and is one too often unknown to the binder. Mr. Adams's own good taste in design is supported by the artistic training and taste of his wife. Mrs. Adams is an artist of much talent and education, and her interest in her husband's profession is as great as his own. She collaborates with him constantly in designing bindings, sometimes in accordance with their own ideas, sometimes carrying out the wishes of the owners of the books. A few of the more elaborately bound volumes bear, beneath the gilding of their fore-edges, delicate designs and scenes in water color which are Mrs. Adams's work.

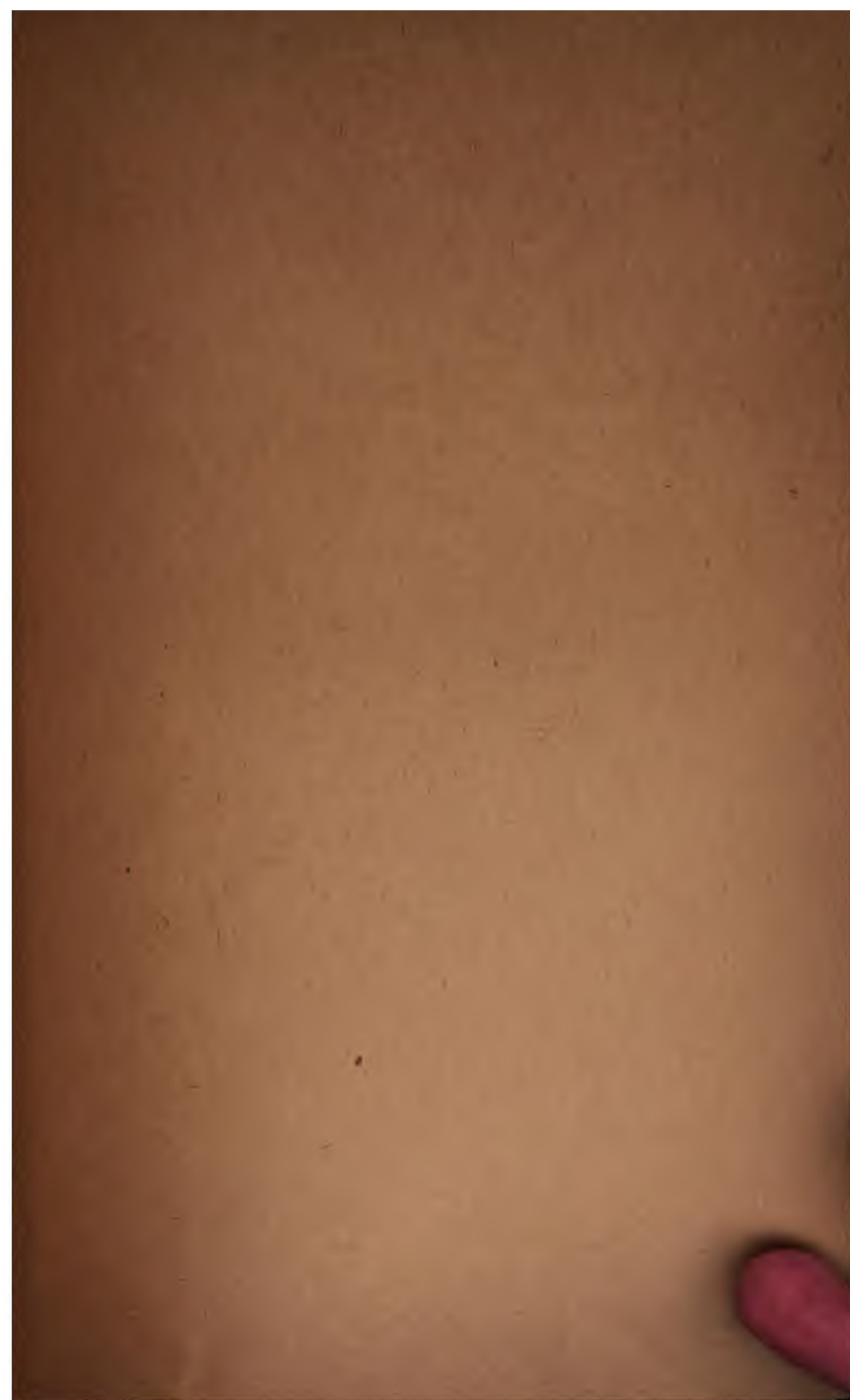
Mr. Adams is still a young man, and the best of his achievements lie yet before him. He is a thorough American, of pioneer Quaker ancestry, and is entirely worthy of the place he has already made for himself as the representative American bookbinder.













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